GLORY ALL AROUND

December 22, 1985, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were filled with fear." --Luke 2:9 (RSV)

Scripture
Isaiah 40:1-11
Luke 2:1-14

One of the wonderful customs in most churches is the annual Christmas pageant, in which the story of the birth of Jesus is retold. The children of the Church School assume the various roles in the drama: angels, shepherds, Magi. If the cast needs to be larger it can be expanded by way of an assortment of stable animals, cows and sheep and sometimes townspeople. The favorite assignments are always the innkeeper who can play his role as an innocent rogue and, of course, Joseph and Mary. Bright, young seminary graduates are inclined to disdain Christmas pageants for their sentimentality, triviality, romanticism and their historic, if not theological inaccuracies. They are called, scornfully, Bathrobe Dramas, after the costumes invariably worn by the Magi and shepherds, and they are the bane of divinity school departments of Liturgics and the Arts. Over the years of ministry and parenting one witnesses a lot of these extravaganzas. We have watched our own as shepherds and Magi but our favorite was the year the cast was large and the excess players were either sheep or hawks who were to be perched around the stable. Ours - probably because he could be counted on to be there - was given the responsibility of leading the whole flock of six year old hawks on stage - for which his siblings named him the "head hawk."

A phone call to friends last week revealed that their daughter got to play the Virgin Mary this year - but unfortunately had an argument with Joseph a few minutes earlier which extended into the peaceful scenario on stage. And exactly as in the wonderful story, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Baby Jesus received some rough handling.

I began, I confess, as an eager young seminary graduate, regarding these exercises with outright suspicion for all the right theological and aesthetic reasons. But I have come now to see theological and existential significance in them not entirely because my own children and the children of friends were on display, but precisely because of the humanness, the scarcely controlled chaos and the imperfections which are characteristic of them. Theologically, that's not inconsistent with the story itself. The birth wasn't very pure, or clear, or sophisticated, or well rehearsed, after all.

My favorite Christmas pageant story is told by William Muehl, professor at Yale Divinity School. He and his wife were watching the kindergarten pageant in which their young son was appearing as a shepherd. The cast was

large and the staging was planned carefully. Twenty little girls were deployed as angels, the boys were the shepherds. Circles drawn on the floor told the angels where to stand, crosses guided the shepherds to their assigned spots. Disaster struck, as it always does, when the flowing robes of the angels covered not only the circles but the adjacent crosses as well. The young shepherds scurried about frantically looking for their places, bumping, pushing, lifting up angels robes. Finally an exasperated little boy, who happened to be William Muehl's five year old, turned to the teacher standing off stage and announced - "These damned angels are fouling up the whole show. They've hidden all the crosses."

Muehl got a book title from his son's trenchant comment on the human condition. He wrote: "We are indeed 'damned angels'...the cross is hidden beneath the flimsy fabric of our simple piety. Our flesh drives and afflicts us from birth to death. But we have the gall to affirm that it once sheltered the eternal." [All the Damned Angels, p. 12-13]

The story itself, told so humanly by Luke, and majestically by Matthew, and symbolically, mystically, by John, is more than a simple narrative. James Wall, Editor of the Christian Century wrote last week that this story "rendered routine by repetition is yet the centerpiece of all other stories..." because it tells us about the nature of love.

So let us look again and let us listen again for what this story says about life and love and God and us.

What do you suppose it was like when "the glory was all around" out on that hillside in the dead of night? When it is necessary to be up either very late or very early we respond to a strangeness - the silence, the aloneness and almost always the chill. People who work at night adjust to it. Some prefer the solitude and the silence. But what do you suppose it was like on the hillside, huddled around a small fire, wrapped tightly in a blanket, half watching the dozing sheep, half nodding off in that semi-sleep in which seeing and hearing are less efficient but also in a way more accurate? What was the glory of the Lord like when it shone around them? Was it an unearthly glow, like a Steven Spielberg special effect?

It is an interesting word. In the ancient writing of the Old Testament there are twenty five Hebrew terms translated by a single Greek word and its English equivalent - "Glory." In Hebrew they refer to the impact or influence a person or a thing has; in the contemporary idiom, a person's "presence" or aura, or vibrations a person exudes. On the other hand, the Glory of Assyria was its army. Lebanon's glory was its legendary Cedars. A man's wealth or family might be his glory. God's glory is the impact of God's presence: not unlike what Tom Wolfe intended with the phrase "The Right Stuff." God has it, and when you are in its presence you know it even if you can't explain it. Sometimes it is described physically, as in a burning bush or a pillar of fire in the night. And in the New Testament the glory of God radiates, shines in the darkness.

In the Museum of Modern Art in New York City there is a room which will always define "glory all around" for me. Claude Monet's Water Lillies is

art - O'Keefe's Cloud Sky

displayed, three panels covering one entire side of the room with a fourth panel on an adjacent wall. It is a whole universe of soft pastels, alive with light. People generally become quiet in that room. I noticed that after an initial exclamation of wonder nearly everyone became reflective, respectful of the viewing rights of others - which is a bit of a novelty in New York - almost as if they were in the presence of the holy. There was glory all around.

insert b

I've concluded that George Frederick Handel knew what glory sounded like. He wrote "Messiah" in 24 days, August 22 to September 14, 1741. His servant came into the room just as the composer finished the Hallelujah Chorus, found him seated at the writing table with tears streaming down his cheeks and Handel is reported to have said, "I did see all heaven before me, and the great God himself." ~~If Monet got the colors~~, Handel knew what glory all around sounded like.

In 1882 the philosopher William James wrote the classic work on the subject, Varieties of Religious Experience. He observed, "It is as if there were in human consciousness a sense of reality, of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular senses." [p. 58]

Philosophers and psychologists observe that we have a capacity for the transcendent. Some, of course, dispute the existence of a transcendent but no one really argues over our capacity for it. In the meantime the artists and musicians keep stretching our perceptions, hinting at reality and honesty and beauty beyond our ability to comprehend.

The basic theological question is mixed up in all of this. Is there anything here? When glory shone all around, was it authentic - or simply a product of the shepherds' human need for the transcendent, imaginatively projected? Did the shepherds have an apparition? Was it something they ate for dinner? Do these religious experiences human beings insist on having have any substance? Are religious visionaries crazy or simply saner than the rest of us?

Because not everyone has the same mystical, religious experience, religion customarily resolves the basic theological issue by endowing a few special people with access to God. They become the holy men or women, the shamans, the high priests who serve as intermediaries for the rest of us, carrying requests to the Almighty, and bringing back the answers.

The story of the birth of Jesus is unique exactly in that the glory shone all around on the hillside, of all places, not just on the religious experts. That is one of the most profound meanings of the story. From the start, the story goes to great lengths to say that this act of God, this revelation, is not so specialized that only a class of trained, approved and properly initiated clergy will understand it. Rather this is happening out in the open, during the night shift, to a bunch of shepherds. The place it happened is significant. So are the chartacters.

Now the greeting card people have done a marvelous job of cosmetic

upgrading on the shepherds. They are endowed with virtue, strong hard working men, simple but profound in faithfulness. That's simply not accurate. Garrison Keilor says shepherds were the equivalent of parking lot attendants - steady work, but not very romantic, and certainly not pregnant with theological potential. Catholic scholar Raymond Brown corrects the myth: "Shepherds were considered dishonest, outside the law." [The Birth of the Messiah, p. 426]

Luke's point is just this - and we deny its power if we transform shepherds into nice, socially respectable people - the shepherds at least by normally accepted criteria, are the least likely people in all of society to have access to God. No one could be further from a priest or the Pharisees and Saducees, or an Elder or Deacon or Clergy. That is the Christian point in the story. "Glory shone all around." The God involved in this story so radically loves the whole world that the revelation begins not in the Jerusalem Temple, or Mecca, or Rome or Edinburgh or Salt Lake City, but in Bethlehem which is pretty much "nowhere" and its first manifestation is the glory shining around a hillside full of dumb sheep and the first to witness it and celebrate it are not the priests or even the faithful at their prayers but a motley bunch of social outcasts who probably had been drinking too much. It is a powerfully different religious story. Its first intent is to be inclusive, universal: to smash the barriers and bridge the gaps which historically have divided the race and individuals from one another.

The universal and timeless human experience of aloneness and silence in the still of the night is gathered up in this story and penetrated by the most startling and radical suggestion ever made: God has something to say and - God takes the initiative and says it. With the exquisite skills of a poet the Gospel writer is straining for the words to announce the startling idea that God is saying something new and that it is for all people to hear. There is glory all around.

In this eloquent gesture, God is saying that the ultimate issues about us are resolved: that among all the things to worry about in this life, all the anxieties and uncertainities, there is one we can now put to rest, and that is the matter of our own ultimate destiny. We are loved thoroughly and eternally by the God who created us, this birth says, and there is no reason for any man to be afraid.

Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown was recently transferred to a new Presbytery: we Presbyterian ministers have to redefine and restate our faith every time we move and declare ourselves to a new Presbytery. He wrote, for the occasion, one of the simplest, unadorned expressions of the Good News I have ever read: "I believe that the ultimate disposition of who I am is in the hands of one whose hands are ultimately sustaining and gracious, however sternly they have to deal along the way with such recalcitrant cargo as myself." That is the word in the story and the shepherd's hillside experience. We are in the hands of one who loves us and whose hands are ultimately gracious.

Glory all around means that God's gracious activity in life is not confined

to special holy places. The birth in a barn in the middle of a political census with the announcement on the hillside means that the arena for God's activity is life itself. It means that life is ever full of promise and potential, that no dream should ever die and no vision should be forgotten. Thus W. H. Auden in the Christmas Oratorio has the shepherds exclaiming "Tonight for the first time the prison gates have opened. Music and sudden light have interrupted our routine tonight and swept the filth of habit from our hearts. O here and now the endless journey starts."

That hillside where the glory shone all around represents the places where life is lived most honestly and most humanly. It is intentionally not a designated holy place. The whole point is that the places where human life is lived become holy places: the classrooms, the courtrooms, the operating rooms, the kitchens, and bedrooms and board rooms, the locker rooms, barber shops, beauty parlors and barn yards. "Glory all around" is a way of saying that God who loves you will come into your life where you are living it. The birth of that baby in such a roughly human setting means that while you and I may experience God in our prayers, or while listening to wonderful music or experiencing powerful art, God's love is born, happens, goes to work in places that are mundane, ordinary. Where there is new life, new love - new hope: where there is judgment, discomfort, creative change; where there is new resolve, new dreams, there, in life, Jesus Christ is born.

For the Frontispiece to the last volume of poetry published during his life-time, Robert Frost wrote something which is haunting:

"But God's own descent
Into flesh was meant
As a demonstration
That the supreme merit
Lay in risking spirit
In substantiation.
Spirit enters flesh
And for all its worth
Charges into earth
In birth after birth
Ever fresh and fresh..."

[In the Clearing]

The story is about love being born into human history: God's love

enfleshed, sung by heavenly choruses and mumbled and shouted by motley shepherds. Glory shone all around. That incarnation keeps happening. God's love keeps coming into life, in "birth after birth," Frost wrote: in people, in the relationships we are given which always have the power of life in them, in our aspirations and striving and hoping and loving.

The trouble with sermons, and with all cerebral religious exercises, the theologians remind us, is that they set out to do what finally cannot be done; namely, reduce the holy to understandable ideas. "If I could have told you what it meant, I wouldn't have danced," the great ballerina answered when asked what her dancing meant. "God," Frederick Buechner wrote, "is a poet searching for the right word... tries Noah, Abraham, Moses, David.... Word after word God tries, and then tries once more to say it right, to get it all into one final word what he is and what human life is and why the suffering of love is precious...and the word God finds - who could have guessed it? - is this one, Jesus of Nazareth." [A Room Called Remember, p. 84]

So Luke, the writer of this story that is the centerpiece of all stories, chose words with the precision of a poet and gave us this gift which each time we hear it makes us stop and listen and look carefully into our own dark nights and to see again glory all around....

"And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news ofa great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the City of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Glory to God in the highest.

Amen.